What Gujarat means

If the Congress needs to worry about its urban base, the BJP has to work on a rural message

Written by Ashutosh Varshney | Published: December 26, 2017 12:00 am
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As the dust starts to settle, political reactions become clearer, and statistical details recede into the background, it is time to concentrate on the big picture that the recent Gujarat elections present. Something of substantial significance has happened, with likely national ramifications.

It is important, first, to put Gujarat in a larger perspective. In modern times, Gujarat's political significance has always exceeded its demographic weight. It is the land that gave birth to the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. It is the only state outside the Hindi heartland which has produced two prime ministers, Morarji Desai and Narendra Modi. It is also the state where the JP
movement acquired considerable punch in the 1970s, where the Ayodhya movement formally began in the 1980s, and where Hindu nationalists first established their hegemony, starting in the late 1990s. Gujarat tends to emanate national significance.

The journey from a Gandhian hegemony to a Hindu nationalist one, of course, has been tortuous. It is a radical inversion of meanings. If Gandhi believed that “the Hindus, the Muslims, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen”, Hindu nationalists never abandoned the idea of a Hindu ownership of the nation. According to M.S. Golwalkar, a central figure of Hindu nationalist discourse, “the foreign races in India must adopt the Hindu culture and language, ... must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture.. (and) may (only) stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, not even citizen’s rights”. Muslims, for Golwalkar, were a “foreign race”. Hindu nationalists have never disowned his words.

Where do we stand now? Do these elections signify something new?

In, and of themselves, data alone cannot fully answer this question. The key issue is how to interpret the data. Consider the various ways in which BJP’s performance in Gujarat can be presented.

If we go by vote percentages, what should be the yardstick — a comparison with the 2012 elections or the 2014 parliamentary elections? If 2012, is it more pertinent to say the BJP increased its vote share by 1.25 per cent this time, or that the opposition Congress party gained 2.5 per cent? If 2014, have commentators emphasised enough that the BJP’s vote share plummeted by a whopping 10 per cent? One can, of course, say that parliamentary elections are very different from state elections, and there is some truth in that position. But the fact that Modi has tended to become the principal campaigner for his party even in state elections, addressing not one or
two but tens of rallies, substantially dilutes the meaning of this distinction. Even state elections, in part, become a referendum on Modi.

Vote shares are important for scholars. But in the end, it is the artifact of vote shares — namely, seat shares — that shapes the public imagination and often constitutes the real meaning of an election. That is where the BJP has badly faltered, providing a moment of possible revival to the Congress. The BJP has won a majority of seats, but it has put in its worst performance, and the Congress its best since 1985. A difference between the formal and the real has emerged.

Two historical parallels come to mind, not exact but meaningful. In 1967, the Congress won the national election, but its seats came down so much that the non-Congress parties began to feel invigorated, even though they lost. Similarly, in 1991, the Congress formed the government in Delhi, but the BJP, that finished second, increased its tally to an unprecedented 120. Leading the BJP then, L. K. Advani argued that those finishing second had actually triumphed. It is in this Advani sense, premised on the distinction between the formal and the real, that the Congress would derive greater strength from this election. Modi might have saved the party from the utter ignominy of loss, but he could not repeat glory.

What else can we say?

First, if development does not work as a campaign theme, Modi would openly embrace anti-Muslim tropes in pursuit of victory. Mani Shankar Aiyar’s “neech kism ka aadmi” (a lowly person) remark was amenable to multiple interpretations: As a customary form of Brahminical condescension towards the lower castes (Aiyar, after all, is a Brahmin name and Modi comes from an OBC caste); as tasteless Stephens-Oxbridge arrogance towards the vernacular masses. Instead, Modi spun it as an expression of a Mughal mindset, and also linked Aiyar (and Manmohan Singh) to a Pakistani conspiracy. Aiyar’s repugnant and self-defeating elitism hurts the Congress and injures the liberal cause, but he is no Pakistani stooge. Nor is
Manmohan Singh. Modi also compared Rahul Gandhi’s ascension to his party’s presidency with Aurangzeb’s inheritance of throne, ignoring that even Hindu princes rose to kingship by ancestry, not by election. In pre-modern times, lineage-based inheritance of power was not a peculiar Muslim perversion.

Second, the BJP won cities but lost the countryside. If Congress needs to worry about its urban popularity, the BJP has to work on a rural message. Its rural victory in UP earlier this year may not be typical; its rural setback in Gujarat might well turn out to be. We can’t be sure. The next four assembly elections are all in states more rural than Gujarat. But in the longer run, this is a bigger problem for the Congress. India is rapidly urbanising. Electorally insignificant since independence, cities will play an increasingly bigger role in politics. The BJP is better placed for the likely urban challenge of Indian politics.

Finally, as widely noted, the image of Rahul Gandhi as a reluctant and incompetent politician went through a significant change. Political parties need effective campaigners. If Rahul Gandhi can repeat this performance in the next few state elections, India’s democracy will benefit from the emergence of a solid Opposition, taking on the BJP in 2019.

Equally important was Rahul Gandhi’s message. Election campaigns often degenerate into a vituperative tit-for-tat. By repeatedly arguing that bhaichara aur pyaar (warmth and affection for all) would be his party’s answer to the BJP’s divisive bitterness, and concentrating on economic policy and governance, Rahul Gandhi avoided a race to the bottom.

Restrained rhetoric nearly worked this time, but will it next year and after? Surprises have never eluded Indian politics.

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Shyam Balu  
Dec 27, 2017 at 11:13 am  
Gujaratis are the most respectful people in India, I am not a Gujarati and more than 1000 km away for this state, however my travel in Gujarat from the south to north and west to east of Gujarat and the interaction of similar travellers revealed that Gujaratis believe in Give and take respect, I had seen young girls and women’s walk without fear in the streets of Gujarat even in the night hours. This state has seen the worst of Natural calamities like Plaque, Famine, floods, earthquake and so on. The state leadership had done the best of their efforts to normalise the situation as early as possible. Being such a big state also need time to establish reachability and development. Such a respectful people had reacted heavily during the riots which have solid reason too. When things happens above our patience, we all react. However judging a state and Its people and haunting for the riots is never appreciable. There is cultural tradition and heritage which need to be remembered always.

Vikram At  
Dec 27, 2017 at 9:18 am  
EVM name it self says Everyone Vote Modi. bus naaam hi kaafi hai

Apte
Dec 27, 2017 at 8:40 am

1. Author’s observations as regards response of urban rural voters are correct. 2. BJP is being criticised by a group of political/social activists, journalists (who may or may not be sympathisers of parties opposing BJP) and a section of media for its pro-urban voters’ policies. These critics say that farmers’ suicides, their indebtedness and their agitation for remunerative prices for farm produce etc., do not get enough attention of BJP leaders. Fact is that when a political party is out of power it claims to implement pro-farmer policies but once it is in power its leaders do not take any steps which benefit small/medium scale farmers. 3. It is necessary for urban voters to know the politics behind creating urban-rural divide. 4. I feel that urban voters should vote for a party that promises (a) a fair deal to marginal small farmers and (b) to levy tax on rich farmers. It is an open secret that tax-free farm income is a vehicle used by politicians to launder ill-gotten wealth.
happens when opposition is filled with madrassa educated low lives, who can't adopt to technology and use it to their disadvantage, its brilliance of Modi who could hack evm on all India level sitting in gujrat, my PM for life cheeeeeers.

Mark
Dec 26, 2017 at 10:57 pm
Mr. Pradhan, Mr. Goel and Mr. Sinha are three senior ministers in Modi's cabinet. Rajnath Singh son. They are all second generation BJP netas. If you still don't get it, its the BJP's version of dynasty. And I am not even talking of states where Maharashtra CM is a second generation dynasts.
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